Victor Sloan, Drift

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D R I F T

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Cover: Victor Sloan, *Central Way, Craigavon*, Giclée print 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1981

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Welcome to the F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Victor Sloan's exhibition *Drift*. On behalf of Banbridge District Council and the F.E. McWilliam Gallery, I would like to thank Victor Sloan for accepting the invitation to exhibit here and for all his work in preparation for the show. Feargal O'Malley has co-curated this exhibition with Riann Coulter and we would like to thank him for his hard work on behalf of the Gallery.

We are very pleased that Ka Fue Lay, who is originally from Vietnam and lived in Craigavon during the early 1980s, has agreed to open this exhibition. Ka Fue Lay is also the star of Victor Sloan's new video work which is shown here for the first time.

As always, we are grateful to Gallery's Programming Committee, of which I have the honour of being Chair, for their continued support and advice. They are, Prof. Philip Napier, Dr Maurna Crozier, Jasper McKinney, MBE, Dr Suzanne Lyle, Anne Stewart, Cllr Joan Baird, MBE, Cllr John Hanna, Catriona Regan, Thérèse Rafferty and Dr Riann Coulter.

The F.E. McWilliam Gallery, Banbridge District Council, its Councillors and staff, extend a warm welcome to all visitors to this exhibition.

Cllr Marie Hamilton, Chairman of Banbridge District Council

Left:
Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre (Cafe I), Craigavon (detail)
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Drift is an exhibition that has grown out of connections between people and place. Victor Sloan has lived and worked in and around Craigavon for many years. He has watched the 'new city' grow and has seen its successes and failures. He was there in 1979 when a group of the Vietnamese Boat People were settled in the city's housing estates. Their arrival was a consequence of Margaret Thatcher's decision to accept the UN's request to let 10,000 Vietnamese Refugees settle in the UK. Although most of the refugees were temporarily accommodated in London, the Government implemented a "dispersal" housing programme which saw them scattered across rural Britain. With hindsight it is clear that this approach was not a success and most of the Vietnamese quickly migrated towards big cities looking for work and a sense of community. However, some did stay and for a period, Craigavon was home to these people who had risked their lives to escape conflict, persecution and deprivation in Vietnam.

In preparation for this exhibition, Sloan rekindled his friendship with Ka Fue Lay, who was a teenager when he settled in Craigavon in 1979. Recently, while visiting Ka Fue Lay at his home in Salisbury, England, Sloan made a new video work in which Ka Fue discusses his life in Vietnam, displays family photographs and fondly recalls his time in Craigavon. The exhibition also includes Sloan's black and white photographs of Craigavon from the late 1970s and early 1980s, contemporary images that he created by scratching, painting and bleaching photographic prints and recent large, colour photographs of Craigavon.

Sloan's images of Craigavon depict an often bleak and alienating landscape. In contrast, his images of the Vietnamese, and of children playing at Pinebank, remind us that there were positive aspects to living in a new city and that Craigavon was born out of a Utopian desire for improved living conditions. While Craigavon, its shopping centre, roundabouts and Balancing Lakes, may seem unlikely targets for nostalgia, for those of us who grew up there, Sloan's images do bring back fond memories of playing in wide open spaces, tumbling on the shopping centre railings and firework displays at the lakes.

An influential artist and educator, Sloan is internationally recognised for his work relating to the Northern Irish Troubles. His arresting images of Orange Order Marches, and other traditions particular to this place, have been exhibited all over the world. Arguably, the impact of Sloan's Troubles work has overshadowed other areas of his practice, including the Craigavon and Vietnamese work and his powerful series of images inspired by the abandoned Soviet Military base at Borne Sulinowo, Poland. The Borne Sulinowo series is currently on exhibit in Belfast at the University Art Gallery, University of Ulster. Together, *Drift* and *Borne Sulinowo* remind us that Sloan is not only a very accomplished artist but also that his oeuvre extends well beyond Northern Ireland and tackles diverse subjects with universal relevance.

Dr Riann Coulter, Curator, F.E. McWilliam Gallery
& Feargal O'Malley, Curator, University of Ulster

Drumgor, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1985

PLACE AND PLACELESSNESS IN VICTOR SLOAN'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF CRAIGAVON

DR JUSTIN CARVILLE

Left:
Central Way, Craigavon
Giclée print 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1981

Victor Sloan's photograph *Central Way, Craigavon, 1981*, depicts the combined visual markers of place and 'placelessness' that characterise the 1960s configuration of the New Town as a familiar, yet alien, built environment. The assembly of tarmacadam, concrete, stainless steel street-lighting and road signage that converge at the circular intersection are all motivated to facilitate the continuous flow of movement and mobility of the automobile. The looping form of the roundabout had become an increasingly standard system for managing the flow of traffic through high density urban and suburban developments throughout Britain and Northern Ireland during the 1960s, just at that period when Craigavon was beginning to be conceived in the minds of its planners as a linear city linking the towns of Portadown and Lurgan following the introduction of The New Towns Act (Northern Ireland) in 1965.[1] Existing originally as a representation in the draftsman's sketches of the proposed new suburban environment imagined by urban planners and engineers, spaces such Central Way were designed to be easily and quickly passed through on the way to somewhere else. There were no foot-paths or pedestrian crossings to distract drivers or slow the flow of traffic, only road-signage designed to encourage the driver of the automobiles passing through to move-on swiftly without delaying to observe the terrain around them. The intersection of roads at roundabouts such as that represented in Sloan's photograph *Central Way*, facilitate the navigation of vehicles to any number of different places, but there is no time or space to dwell in this particular location.

Spaces such as Central Way are what the human geographer Edward Relph observes as "the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes" that encourage a sense of 'placelessness'.[2] More recently the French anthropologist Marc Augé has used the term 'non-place' to describe such spaces of transience and circulation, but Relph's concept of 'placelessness' refers not only to the physical spaces themselves, but also to their broader impact on human experience of belonging and attachment to place.[3] The effect of spaces such as Central Way extend beyond their own particular configuration of the built environment, and reflect for Relph the condition of the experience of place in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The everywhere of intersecting roads "imposed on the landscape rather than developing with it, are not only features of placelessness in their own right", he observes, "but, by making possible the mass movement of people with all their fashions and habits, have encouraged the

1 For an early account of the establishment of Development Commissions in Northern Ireland and their role in planning New Towns such as Craigavon see; Guy P. F. Steed and Morgan D. Thomas, "Regional Industrial Change: Northern Ireland", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, 2 (1971), 344-360. See also Gerry Burns, 'Craigavon' in *Victor Sloan: Selected Works, 1980-2000* (Belfast: Ormeau Baths Gallery/ Orchard Gallery, 2001), 9–11.

2 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, (London: Pion, 1976), Preface, unpaginated.

3 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to An Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. Jon Howe (London: Verso, 1995). See also Marc Augé, An Anthropology of Contemporaneous Worlds, trans. Amy Jacobs (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 110.

spread of placelessness well beyond their immediate impacts".[4] For Relph, therefore, 'placelessness' involves not only "a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike and feel alike", but also offer people the limited "same bland possibilities for experience".[5]

Central Way, like the many other roundabouts and labyrinthine road networks that cut their way through Craigavon, was designed as a space to be experienced only through the windscreen and wing and rear-view mirror of the automobile. Coming into sight through one rectangular frame as the car approached the roundabout, it receded from view in the other as the driver passed through on their journey to somewhere else. It was a landscape designed with the specific purpose of dissolving in the motorist's gaze. As a planned environment it is a space that generates a sense of what Relph identifies as 'incidental outsideness', an attitude that arises in relation to places that are mere backdrops to other social activities and are detached from the need to form a bond to place.[6] Sloan's photograph, however, provides an alternative perspective to the automobile driver's mundane, uniform visual experiences of Central Way. The banal emptiness of this circuitous space from any distinctive markers of place is clearly conveyed in the photograph, as is the sense of the roundabout's isolation from the numerous locations that it connects the commuter to as they pass through it on their way to some other place. However, the vantage point and angle of vision adopted by Sloan in his photograph of Central Way, makes the viewer aware that the photographer was situated in this space rather than passing through it or standing outside of it. The elevated vantage point, to the left of the road, slightly de-centres the rational configuration of the straight, asphalt traffic lanes carved into the landscape, and ruptures the smooth completion of the circular formation of the roundabout. The foliage of bushes, and branches of trees in the foreground, also interrupts the normative organization of the pictorial space of the photograph which would allow the viewer unfettered visual access of the space contained within the frame of the image. Society has become accustomed to photography's technical inscription of linear perspective in which the frame of the camera's viewfinder is the window through which the world is rationally transferred onto the flat, two-dimensional plane of the photograph. In this technical configuration of the cultural conventions of the two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional space, the viewer is fixed in relation to the photograph. In the words of Christian Metz, "the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera".[7] By photographing Central Way

4 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, (London: Pion, 1976), 90.

5 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, (London: Pion, 1976), 90.

6 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, (London: Pion, 1976), 51–55.

7 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 49.

from this slightly elevated, de-centred perspective, and allowing the environment to encroach into the frame of the image, Sloan brings the viewer with him into the planned landscape of the roundabout, providing an opportunity to experience the world depicted in the photograph not as some objective space detached from experience, but as a lived environment, a space vying for attention between the social forces of place and 'placelessness'.

As a photographer and artist, or more properly an artist who uses the medium of photography in his reaction to the subject he takes a photograph of, before reacting to the resulting photographic print, Sloan has had a long, and sometimes unsettled, relationship with Craigavon.[8] It is a relationship that could have easily generated an overly sympathetic view of the plight of Craigavon's inhabitants in the early decades of its development, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, a cynical and detached documentation of the New City's isolated environments of shopping centres, housing estates and community centres. The sensitivity towards those communities living in Craigavon is evident in Sloan's photographs, as is the innate sense of alienation arising out of the disconnect between the city's architectural forms, configurations of 'community centres' and the lives of those who inhabit the environments planned remotely by urban planners. To categorize Sloan's photographs of Craigavon through such polarised perspectives, however, would be to over simplify what is a much more nuanced approach taken by him through the medium of photography towards representing the architectural and social peculiarities of the area over a period of three decades. During that time, he has produced a series of visual statements on the current state of affairs of this planned development at particular moments when relations between the alienating spaces of the New City and the community animated the struggles between place and 'placelessness'. In series such as *Craigavon and Vietnamese Boat People* during the 1980s, *Fireworks Craigavon* in the 1990s, in individual works such as *Stay Out, Craigavon, 1991*, and his most recent large scale colour works of Craigavon's shopping and community centres such as *Moyraverty Community Centre, 2014*, Sloan has not so much provided testimony to the areas changing social configurations as place, rather he has issued a set of visual declarations on the relationship between the built environment and the community. In a number of respects this durational engagement with Craigavon as a photographer and artist has ensured that Sloan has kept true to his word. In an early text and image piece published in Circa with the writer and historian Gerry Burns titled

8 In conversation with David Brett, Sloan comments that "I react to the subject and take a photograph, and then I print it and react to the print". See David Brett, "Considering Photography and Other Matters", Circa 20 (1985), 14.

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon I
Silver gelatin print, toner and watercolour, 24 × 37.5cm, 1984

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon III
Silver gelatin print, toner and watercolour, 24 × 37.5cm, 1984

'Craigavon – The Heart is Missing', he commented that he would "continue to work on the project as long as he lives in the area".[9] Despite the early reservations expressed in the article that the buildings erected for the community of Craigavon bore "no relationship to the lives of the people who live here", his photographs are no less attuned to the attempts by the community to establish a sense of belonging amidst the socially constructed places of poorly designed housing, leisure and consumer spaces.[10] His personal vision of the area is an inescapably human geographical imagining of place through the photographic image.

Perhaps unwittingly, or perhaps intentionally, Sloan has become something of a visual chronicler of Craigavon. However, his account of the transformation of the city is not one that allows for a transparent reading of his visual statements. Sloan's various series and individual images of Craigavon require the viewer to pay attention to the photograph, to concentrate on its surface as well as its pictorial illusion of depth. His photographs reveal a series of relations – the photographer and the place; the artist and the photograph; the photograph and the viewer – which unsettles some of the complacency that resides in looking at photographs. Photographs are violent, observed Roland Barthes, not because they show "violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed".[11] In most contexts photographs coerce the viewer to look straight through their surface directly to the object contained within the pictorial frame of the image. They compel the viewer to rush to interpretation; 'this is a house'; 'here is my car'; 'there is the park'; 'that was at the party'. Such common interpretations of photographs are more than a prescribed lexicon for responding to the experience of looking at the transparent surface of the photograph as if it wasn't there, it is a condition of the relationship we have with photographs. These responses oscillate between presence and absence – the object is both 'here' in the photograph and 'there' in reality – and spatial and temporal distance; what is photographed is in 'another time' and 'another place'. Photography is madness, observed Barthes, precisely because of such vacillating responses to the experience of looking at photographs.[12] Amongst such delusions is the anticipation that although the photograph reinforces the viewer's separation from the time and place of the object photographed, this separation may be overcome by the representation of the place as a photograph, that photography might provide access to that 'other time' and 'other place' which the photograph strives to separate us from.

9 Victor Sloan and Gerry Burns, "Craigavon – The Heart is Missing", *Circa* 5 (1982), 13–15.

10 Victor Sloan and Gerry Burns, "Craigavon – The Heart is Missing", *Circa* 5 (1982), 15.

11 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howe (London: Flamingo, 1984), 91.

12 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howe (London: Flamingo, 1984), 115–117.

Sloan's photographs intervene into these complacent responses we have with photographs, precisely through making the relations between the photographer and the place; the artist and the photograph; and the photograph and the viewer, visible. Instead of simply being allowed to look through the photograph to quickly access what is transparently represented within its frame, as if the photograph itself didn't exist, his photographs require an acknowledgment of their conventional and material presence as images of place. The more conventional documentary work from the early and mid 1980s – a period when Sloan's fascination with the forms and designs of Craigavon's shopping centre, Marlborough House (Craigavon Housing Executive Office) and civic centre as an artist were tempered with his social awareness of their alienating affect on the community – are taken from vantage points that reveal the photographer's relationship to place.[13] Photographs such as *Shopping Centre*, (*Children Playing*), *Craigavon, 1985*, *Bus Stop, Ridgeway, Craigavon, 1982* and *Ridgeway, Craigavon, 1982*, are taken from vantage points and framed by the camera's viewfinder in ways that draw attention to the photographer's conscious organization of pictorial space to illuminate the architectural forms of buildings, boarded up windows, street lighting and signage. These conventions of vantage point, framing and angle of vision, are not employed to produce sterile compositions that reinforce a sense of distance from the built environment, nor are they to establish a separation between viewer and image. They are mobilised instead to draw the viewer into the space of the photograph by revealing the photographer's self-conscious juxtaposition of squares and rectangles, the rectilinear lines of modern European designed housing and the rolling forms of green spaces. An errant form of vernacular modernism, there is an awareness of the photographer's positioning himself in relation to place to draw attention to the 'photographic-ness' of his visual statements of the environment.[14]

These are not simple formal exercises, however, the particular framing of this built environment by Sloan through the camera's viewfinder subtly teases out the alienation of the environment to the community. This combination of the forms of the built environment and their alienating effects, were identified by Sloan early on in his documentation of Craigavon during the 1980s. Commenting on this early engagement with the area he observed "One could be forgiven for thinking that no overall view was ever taken of Craigavon's development. Some of the buildings are interesting enough, as far as shape and design go … I suppose you could say that Craigavon fascinates me,

13 Victor Sloan and Gerry Burns, "Craigavon – The Heart is Missing", *Circa* 5 (1982), 15.

14 See Steve Edwards, 'Vernacular Modernism', in Paul Wood (ed.), *Varieties of Modernism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press/Open University, 2004), 241–268.

insofar as it represents a supposedly planned environment which has gone almost totally wrong. People want a structure and meaning in their environment that will reflect, and in part create, structure in their lives. Craigavon has completely failed to provide them with this".[15] The slightly awkward juxtaposition of the lamppost and commuters waiting at the bus stop in photograph *Bus Stop, Ridgeway, Craigavon*, and the flash-lighting in *Shopping Centre*, (*Children Playing*), convey the detachment of everyday life from place. The pictorial organization of body and spaces are inelegantly coalesced within the frame of the photograph in a visual articulation of the alienating relations between place and community.

Sloan's series of toned photographs marked with oil pastels bring to the surface relations between artist and photograph, and photograph and viewer that similarly question the normative responses to photographs of place. In his discussion of 'insideness' and 'outsideness' in experiences of place and 'placelessness', Relph identifies the visual arts, literature and poetry as modes of imaginative geographies of place that can provide what he terms as 'vicarious insideness'; a deep seated engagement with place experienced second hand through various modes of representation. The anticipation that photography might ameliorate the sense of separation between viewer and the place represented in the photograph is an exemplary instance of the image providing vicarious experiences of place and belonging. If we are to take Barthes at his word, the brute opticality of the photograph – its violent saturation of the eye – has the potential to transport the viewer to the place contained within its frame unfettered by any obstacles. However, Sloan's intuitive marking of the photographic print, the red squiggled lines in images such as *Funfair, City Centre Craigavon, 1984* and circles in *Community Minibus with Senior Citizens, Brownlow, Craigavon, 1984*, interrupts the unrestricted access to the world viewed in the photograph. Although Sloan's use of oil pastels and his subtractive and additive markings on the surface of the photographic print are very much in the realm of his reaction to the photographic print, it is a process that intervenes into the relations between viewer and image; it generates an alternative geographical imagining of place. Writing on Sloan's use of toners, bleach, paint and scalpel to mark the surface of photographic print, Brian McAvera has commented that; "The manipulated image is the method by which he bypasses the soiled coinage of photographic 'honesty', 'truth' and 'authenticity'.[16] In the image *Road, Rathmore, Craigavon, 1985*, something more nuanced is taking place than rupturing the

15 Victor Sloan and Gerry Burns, "Craigavon – The Heart is Missing", *Circa* 5 (1982), 15.

16 Brian McAvera, *Marking the North: The Work of Victor Sloan*, exh.cat. (Dublin and York: Open Air/Impressions Gallery, 1990), 13.

Right:
Bus Stop, Ridgeway, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

photographic codification of realism. The conventional practice of looking at the photograph would be to follow the perspectival lines up to the graffiti across the road and into the disappearing horizon. The red circles marked by oil pastels in the right-hand foreground, indicating bullet holes, force the viewer to check themselves; it transforms the normative expectations of photography's power to ameliorate the separation between viewer and place. Such images constantly distract the viewer, pulling them toward the slightest of details that charge the experience of place with unseen political tension.

Sloan's recent large-scale colour photographic prints such as *Moyraverty Shopping Centre, Craigavon, 2014* and *Shopping Centre, Craigavon, 2014*, are both a continuation of his fascination with the disconnect between planned development and community, and mark a return to his original engagement with its architecture as a sort of disjointed exhibit of objects in a museum.[17] However, there is a sense now that such structures, individual in their own way, are points of intersection that bind Craigavon together as place. They stand as architectural monuments to a modern vision of community that was yoked constantly between place and 'placelessness'. Indeed there is a feeling of redemption in Sloan's most recent work on the tensions between place and 'placelessness', one in which the photographer might just ameliorate the sense of separation between viewer and the place depicted in the photograph.

Sloan's video *Ka Fue Lay*, shot in 2014, depicts one of the many Vietnamese migrants who arrived in Craigavon in the 1980s. Sloan's series *Vietnamese Boat People*, perhaps more than other work on Craigavon, reflected the alienating effects of the area and the struggles to establish an authentic sense of belonging and community in spite of the disconnect between the built environment and the people who lived there. In the video, Ka Fue Lay looks through a series of photographs of friends and family which are shown to the viewer. Hands hold the photographs, fingers point to individuals, stories are told. Although Ka Fue Lay's voice moves between identifying individuals, places and stories of life in another time and another place, the photograph is visible at all times. It is a material presence and a vehicle to express a sense of attachment to place. When Barthes wrote of his search for an authentic experience of memory, he encountered it while sifting through photographs; holding the material object in his hands, moving one photograph in his grasp to the next, he encountered an authentic sense of attachment to the person in the photograph.[18]

17 Victor Sloan and Gerry Burns, "Craigavon – The Heart is Missing", *Circa* 5 (1982), 15.

18 This relates to the infamous 'winter garden' photograph of his mother. See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 67. See also Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs as Objects of Memory', in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (eds.), *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 221–236.

In Sloan's video, this sifting through photographs is combined with what Martha Langford identifies as an "oral-photographic performance".[19] For Langford "The accumulation of photographic moments does not replace memory; rather, it overburdens recall with visual data that explodes in the retelling".[20] Ka Fue Lay's stories told through the material touch of the photograph generate a recitation of another time and another place, bodies and places are coalesced within the pictorial frame of the photograph in expressions of belonging and attachment to this seemingly alienating environment. Despite the sense of placelessness associated with Craigavon to the outsider passing through on their way to some other place, Craigavon, it would seem, is redeemed.

19 Martha Langford, Suspended Conversations: *The After-Life of Memory in Photographic Albums*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queens University Press, 2001), 20.

20 Martha Langford, Suspended Conversations: *The After-Life of Memory in Photographic Albums*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queens University Press, 2001), 21.

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Pinebank Community Centre (Slide), Craigavon
Giclée, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1981

VICTOR SLOAN / DRIFT

KEN GRANT

It looks like we're not quite through the winter. Long after trees have shed their leaves, three children sit atop a playground slide. At its foot, a friend waits, with her hands hitched to her waist, whilst another – at the edge of the drama – runs through the dappled shadow towards the fun. To the left of the picture, a younger child is cupped on an elder's lap, intensely watching the joy she will grow into. A sharp patch of light nips the child's young face, bringing it into bright and uncomplicated life. Children live in the moment, perhaps they don't notice the cold, their world is a playground and home is a breath-heavy drama from one dash to the next. No matter where they land, they get to their feet. All is ideal, with everything to hope for. Prospects are good.

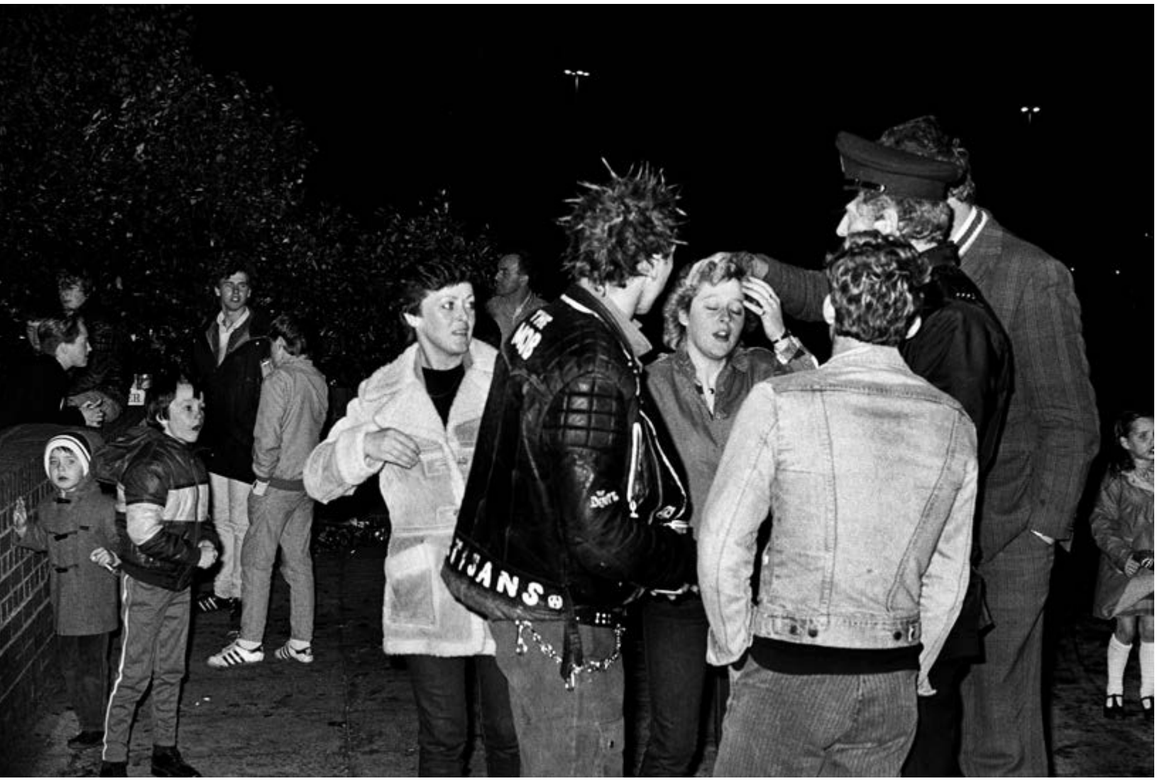
To those settling in Craigavon a decade or so after the original planning had begun in the mid-1960s, the emphasis of play and recreation amongst the clean designs of connecting pathways and traffic-free routes might have seemed an ideal relocation. Conceived as a mix of homes and parkland – with countryside never too far from the doorstep – the distinctive design and the promise of a semirural ideal must have been a convincing prospect. Perhaps the area was understood as a new frontier – or as a self-contained island, pleasantly adrift from the urban tensions and territorial division that Belfast would continue to endure.

Those taking on this new start would be joined, in September 1979, by a group of Vietnamese families, who had themselves made their own life-changing slow journey from their home country and its austerity. They would travel by boat and eventually be picked up by larger ships before reaching the UK – where a welcome invitation to the newly established ideal of Craigavon was offered. As the families established themselves, Victor Sloan was on hand to photograph family groups at their homes and again at the local leisure centre. A forthright flashlight subdues the brown and yellowness of a dull interior, the civic colours of the late 1970s. They are new arrivals, standing isolated and different – but children all the same – and they seem happy enough to respond warmly to the photographer's engagement and the possibilities of making a new world. The aspiration to start again must have felt a common one, shared by those many families who had decided to take part in this new and untested phase of Ulster's development.

Victor Sloan's earliest photographs of Craigavon tend to speak to the dominant photographic forms of the day. Often wide and inclusive, they are free of the layered, abrasive reworking of the print surface that he would later become more widely known for. Instead, they seem carefully populated and precisely seen black and white frames, made with a warmth and sensitivity that manifests itself as a gentle, respectful humanism. They are dexterous frames, pictures that place children – and the new population – against the structures and skies to which they have been prescribed.

As a photographer, it might have been novel to dwell on the confusing road systems, endless roundabouts and sterile planning ideals that proposed the car over anything that might encourage community interaction. Although the work Sloan made at that time moves beyond such understandable preoccupations, the asphalt rings of new traffic systems would appear now and then, as circular grassed mounds flanked by newly planted saplings. Low-rise, uniform housing estates and quiet, rain-washed roads seem dormant – almost as if waiting for the *car-less* population to catch up. Elsewhere, there is a strong sense of how families engage with the new clean-lined pathways. Long before *desire lines* will be established (–those pressed down vernacular trails that wear away the grasslands in spite of planners wishes), locals would have to negotiate new and confusing link bridges and walkways. Victor Sloan articulates this: In a picture that shows a handful of young people whose paths may never cross, he frames shadow, bollards and litter – organizing the straight lines of roofing and flagstones into a picture that is nearly an architectural study, save for the un-tethered dog that goes one way and a child, lagging behind as it tries to keep close to the pack, which goes the other.

The early photographs relate the sense of coming to terms with a new terrain. Moving from one section to another with a young family in tow would always prove taxing to those learning to navigate by the *north star* of a shopping 'super-mall' – that *dead centre* that seems to mark the soulless heart around which new town models are most often constructed. There's a sense of the wider farmland and space that marks the edges of the development, but also a suspicion that, whilst it's there, whilst it's almost close enough to touch, lived experience might mean that it is less easy to ever truly reach. Waiting at a bus stop in front of a low modern estate, low enough to be held by the weight of the sky, high enough to obscure the view of any wider nourishing landscape, a photograph of a group of residents – waiting to move on with their day – is a gentle picture. It seems about little more than a nod to a patient limbo. Yet beyond this, it remains a picture that perfectly acknowledges the quiet and dignified effort of modest travel through an obstructive



Shopping Centre (Punk)
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1985

landscape. Such brief moments of strangers passing give the ordered topography of a new landscape its pulse. In light and dark, the photographs offer precise accounts of the structure of Craigavon, yet often with the trace of youthful inquisitiveness and, eventually, the more growing marks of anger that so often accompany troubled adolescence.

Outside of Craigavon throughout the 1980s, tensions were apparent across the UK and Ireland. Hunger strikes would see ten men die in protests a whole world – or just a few miles – away in Belfast. All lives have soundtracks and the second wave of punk, with its more politicized targeting of the Thatcher government – would become acutely focused around adjacent unrest, social opportunities and the declining models of youth training and employment. We might remember how some of the key industries had earlier relocated to serve as local and sustained employment initiatives for these remote new towns across the UK and Europe – and we may recall how many would become unviable and eventually pull out. Craigavon's own example, *Goodyear*, would close in 1983. Coupled with the unsettling tinder of Ulster's Troubles, as they permeated and influenced daily experiences, the ideal of a new and uncomplicated start – of a new life of nourishment and opportunity – would remain an ideal forged by planners and architects – rather than something experienced without complication. Against such an economic terrain, Sloan's photograph of the young punk with the hand painted leather jacket perhaps really did believe he was living out the *Partisans* song '*17 years of hell*' – whilst he stands facing a watchful policeman…each playing their part in the flash-lit carnival that would interrupt another Craigavon night.

Victor Sloan's own children occasionally appear, as he follows the events that include trips to the shops or mark another Halloween. There is a sense of the seasons turning and rituals punctuating the darker nights. His flashlight reaches scrambling kids as they move through the unrefined grass banks at the edge of a newly established estate. Quite naturally, for a father whose path and time might be shaped by the demands of those he cares for, some pictures betray something of the mundane routines and sparks of exhilaration that parenthood presents to us – none more so, perhaps than in a photograph taken outside the large shopping centre, with its clean ceramic tiling and a welcoming logo – so familiar across so many new towns that it somehow means nothing. Ahead of passing shoppers and an entwined waiting couple, three acrobatic children spin head over heels on a tubular safety barrier, like hanging bats on a steel branch. They are protected by

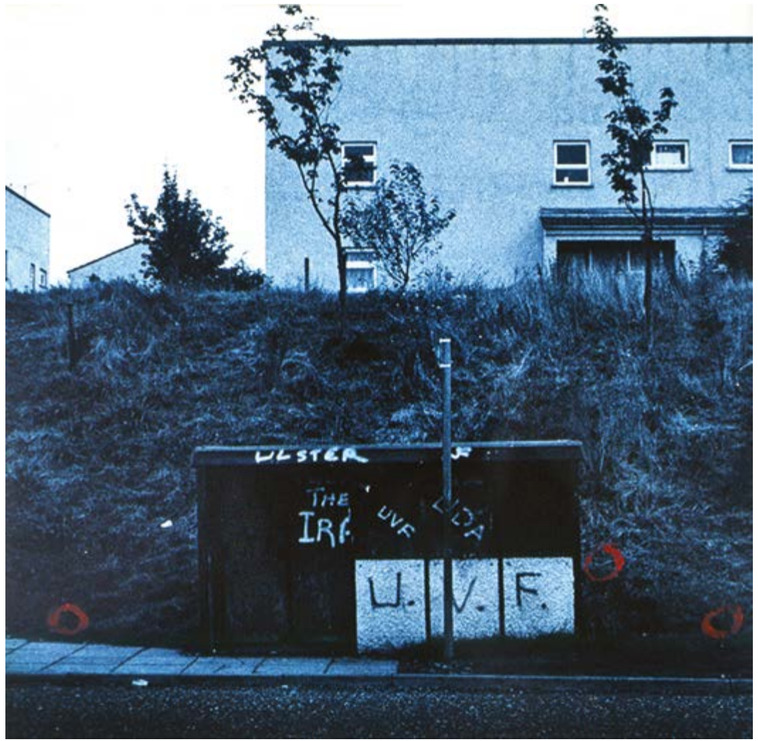
duffle coats and fearless, too slight to ever hit the ground. Somehow in this experimental landscape of Craigavon, with flat roofs that will eventually collect rain and need to be adapted and redesigned by resourceful inhabitants, Victor Sloan records the immersion of youth and the quiet integrity of those now navigating their new land.

As Sloan's working process evolved, so did its form and, as with the territory he would draw source material from, complications arose. The structural pins of the council offices, once photographed from a discreet distance as a topographical study to mark the establishing of local authorities, would eventually return in the work, its Meccano-like frame now held in a tight cold-blue composition. As just one element in a compressed assemblage of caravans, passing traffic and foliage, it is part of a stifling, boxed-in geometry. Against the blue wash of the print, red pastel mark-making pronounces itself. Whether an echo of the notations of architects, or scrutineers – or whether a natural borrowing from the graffiti that increasingly marked the roadways and walls in this new land, the red markings seem troubling additions. Sloan also exploits photography's privileged rendering of scale and perspective. In one of the most curious of these works a handful of people seem to huddle close together in some intimate parliament. They seem so closely engaged, yet so helplessly exposed by the rising slope that conspires to place them, doll-like, atop a paint-daubed wooden shed…weathered forms, ragged against the waning daylight.

Victor Sloan's revisiting of the earlier material overwrites a less complicated time and *Drift* as an exhibition privileges us with this knowledge and context. In a photograph of a play area, now closely cropped and congested, a child is neck deep in the sandy soil of a play pit, head and limbs now ringed by the marks of some more knowing deliberation. Against a roadside junction box, hand-painted with the logos of paramilitary groups, small red circles seem to mark where something troubling may have come to rest. In another picture, the red line draws out an individual from a softly focused crowd at night, as they stand a few steps from what maybe a police jeep. Pastel marks alert us to the places where danger may lie, where evidence was found or innocence lost.

The Craigavon photographs mark a moment of departure on so many levels. To those seeking a new beginning, to those escaping a past…the work Sloan made over that time follows an era of optimism, through uncertainty and ultimately to the onset of tensions that would lap at the tarmac shores of this newly built island. Whether it would ultimately be understood as the *Promised Land*

Right:
Bus Stop, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1985



or as another jigsaw piece in a region that comprised the *Murder Triangle*, will be answered in time. New beginnings, it would seem, are not exempt from older reckonings…

In recent months, Victor Sloan has returned to photograph Craigavon. The brick and tile shopping centre and wider precincts seem to have weathered but are mostly intact. Commerce and livelihoods have survived the many storms that would blow across the decades. Yet now, the buildings seem subdued in these quiet, colour photographs–perhaps even looking somewhat smaller than we might have believed them to be in the wide-eyed early frames Sloan made nearly 40 years ago. After the first swells of a new tide have stilled, after the children had themselves moved further along on that universal journey from innocence to parenthood, Craigavon is no longer a new start but instead a complex and sprawling conurbation. Now it has its own history and deeper shadows. Victor Sloan seems conscious of this – why else might he take a photograph of an overgrown, abandoned playground, a picture that can only be a counterpoint for a much louder moment, one made early in his long engagement with Craigavon, when he saw children run joyful and free, on a more cared for open ground?

Right:
Pinebank Community Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Shopping Centre (Children Playing), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1985

Pinebank Community Centre (Sandpit), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Lake Road, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Building the Civic Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Ridgeway, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Legahory Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Hospital, Craigavon
Giclée, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Shopping Centre (Sign), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Community Minibus with Senior Citizens, Brownlow, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print and toners, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Funfair, City Centre, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Birthday Party, Vietnamese Boat People, Burnside, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Children Playing, Pinebank House Community, Arts and Resource Centre, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Band Parade, Halloween, Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1985

Shed, Balancing Lakes, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1985

Fireworks Display, Halloween, Balancing Lakes, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print and toners, 24 × 25cm, 1985

Road, Rathmore, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print toner and oil pastel, 25 × 25cm, 1985

Statue Unveiling

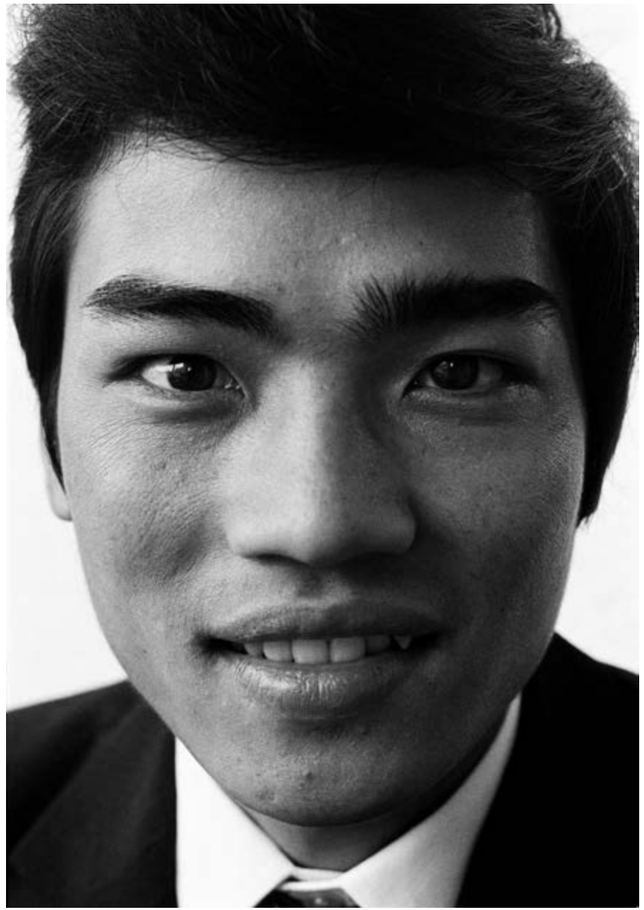
Silver gelatin print, toners and oil pastel, 26 × 26cm, 1985

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon II

Silver gelatin print, toner and watercolour, 24 × 37.5cm, 1984

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre (Cafe I), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre (Café II), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984



Ka Fue Lay

Giclée print on dibond, 29.7 × 42cm, 1984

Ka Fue Lay

Digital Video, Colour, Stereo Sound,

9 mins 33secs (looped), 2014

Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Moyraverty Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Cafe, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 182.88 × 95.67cm, 2014

Band Parade, Halloween, Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1985

Birthday Party, Vietnamese Boat People, Burnside, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Building the Civic Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Bus Stop, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1985

Bus Stop, Ridgeway, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Cafe, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Central Way, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1981

Children Playing, Pinebank House Community, Arts and Resource Centre, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Community Minibus with Senior Citizens, Brownlow, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print and toners, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Drumgor, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1985

Fireworks Display, Halloween, Balancing Lakes, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print and toners, 24 × 25cm, 1985

Funfair, City Centre, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1984

Hospital, Craigavon
Giclée, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Ka Fue Lay
Digital Video, Colour, Stereo Sound, 9 mins 33secs (looped), 2014

Ka Fue Lay
Giclée print on dibond, 29.7 × 42cm, 1984

Lake Road, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Legahory Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 182.88 × 95.67cm, 2014

Moyraverty Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Pinebank Community Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Pinebank Community Centre (Sandpit), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Pinebank Community Centre (Slide), Craigavon
Giclée, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1981

Ridgeway, Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Road, Rathmore, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print toner and oil pastel, 25 × 25cm, 1985

Shed, Balancing Lakes, Craigavon
Silver gelatin print, toner and oil pastel, 24 × 25cm, 1985

Shopping Centre (Children Playing), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1985

Shopping Centre, Craigavon
Giclée print on dibond, 106.68 × 55.8cm, 2014

Shopping Centre (Punk)
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1985

Shopping Centre (Sign), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1982

Statue Unveiling
Silver gelatin print, toners and oil pastel, 26 × 26cm, 1985

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre (Cafe I), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre (Café II), Craigavon
Giclée print, 50.8 × 35.56cm, 1984

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon I
Silver gelatin print, toner and watercolour, 24 × 37.5cm, 1984

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon II
Silver gelatin print, toner and watercolour, 24 × 37.5cm, 1984

Vietnamese Boat People, Moyraverty Community Centre, Craigavon III
Silver gelatin print, toner and watercolour, 24 × 37.5cm, 1984

I wish to thank Victor Sloan for his co-operation and enthusiasm for this project. Thanks to Ken Grant and Dr Justin Carville for their insightful catalogue essays. Bill Johnson, Prestige Pictures, Eleanor McCann, Iris Colour, Rebekah McCabe & Michael Corr, PLACE and Colin Finley, Grallagh Studios, have all helped to make this exhibition possible.

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Feargal O'Malley's input as co-curator has been crucial from the beginning and it has been a pleasure to work with him again. As always, thanks to the staff of the F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Banbridge District Council who have made this exhibition possible.

Dr Riann Coulter, Curator, F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio

The artist would like to thank the following for their help in the production of this exhibition:

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F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio